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TRUE BLUE

STIRRING STORIES OF NAVAL ACADEMY LIFE



TRUE TO HIS COLORS

OR

THE DYNAMITE TERROR OF CHESAPEAKE BAY.

BY ENSIGN CLARKE FITCH, U.S.N.

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CHAPTER I.

A CADET RESCUE CALL.

"A. N. A!"

"Hear that?"

"Cadets!"

"What's up?"

"Four!"

"Our class, too!"

"Rush!"

"A hail for a rescue—the academy danger cry! Eyes and ears wide open, now!"

Clif Faraday, always brisk, as he spoke these words set a spirited example.

With his two inseparable chums and fellow students—Vic Rollins and Ridgely—he had been proceeding leisurely enough along the dusk-haunted Annapolis streets.

The trio were returning to the home institution from the practice steamer, Andes, which the day previous had completed a brief cruise around Chesapeake Bay.

"A. N. A." was a hail of comradeship the world over: "Annapolis Naval Academy."

"Cadets," meant "attention!" "Four" the class

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to which the three belonged, and "Rush" a warning or hail of appeal in the present instance, they were sure of that.

The challenge so direct and distinct instantly advised the startled plebes that some fellow student was in peril or trouble.

"Who is it, I wonder?" asked Vic, with an eager stare all around them.

"No—where did it come from?" pressed Ridgely, urgently.

Clif had made a bound to the middle of the road.

There, posed in an attitude of suspense, he raised a hand to urge silence.

Every way of the crack cadet's supple form—every expression of his fine, intelligent face, showed trained senses on a needlepoint flutter, groping to locate the source of the recent animating hail.

"Hush!" he directed.

"Rush!" came the disturbing call, breathlessly repeated, but muffled this time.

"I see!" cried Vic, his eyes sweeping the dark, deserted street, and halting at a certain part of it.

"So do I!" shouted Ridgely.

Clif had forestalled both of them with a glide—a movement, or, rather, a series of them—he had centered his attention on one direct spot.

Down the rotting, wooden steps of a dismantled building some one had rolled.

It seemed as if he would never cease rolling, for he was long, uncoiling, rubbery.

The cadet uniform in which the figure was garbed gave force to the cadet rescue call.

There was only one phenomenon of lankness in the Fourth Class who could possibly answer to this gyrating bunch, all arms and feet, flopping across the slanting pavement almost into the gutter.

"Fishcake!" identified Vic, in a flash.

"Look at him!" gasped the wondering Ridgely—"has he had a fit!"

"More like a hit!" supplemented Vic—"something has sent him spinning."

"Somebody, you mean!"

"And there he is!"

Meantime, all three of the puzzled, half alarmed cadets had kept up a brisk run for the scene of their chum's extraordinary exhibition.

That spectacle unfolded into a series, as they progressed.

Fishcake was the tallest, slimmest plebe in the naval academy.

He was its spryest, too, when fervid occasion drove him to forget that indolent, tired feeling which seemed to have been born in him.

He had come rolling down the steps and across the sidewalk as if urged by a blow, a push, some momentum not to be immediately resisted.

As he whirled, something in his hand whirled with him—of small, round form very much resembling the pot or brazier that holds a tinker's kit.

As he checked himself its contents rolled out—half a dozen tools, the watchers fancied, although they glittered and gleamed like weapons made of the brightest Damascus steel.

Once on his feet Fishcake was a rooted rock—solidly based, he whirled erect now, grabbing up in either hand one of the scattered implements.

Then the excited runners observed that these were not tools, as they had supposed.

"Knives!" muttered Clif, in perplexity.

"The wonder of it!" added breathless Ridgely.

"Come on!" towards the dark steps rang out Fishcake's noisiest twang.

He brandished his weapons terrifically, swinging his lank form so that he covered a sweep of surely three yards.

A slim, wiry fellow, bounding down the steps after him, making for him direct, wavered at this.

"Fishcake!" hailed Vic, in a shout.

The lank pleb continued to dash and dare heroically, but the man he invited to approach darted a startled look at the onspeeding trio.

That instant he whirled, scanned the street like a cornered rat, and started down a blind alley straight and swift as an arrow.

"Is he important?" blurted Vic, dazed and uncertain.

"Don't know," drawled Fishcake.

"Who is he?"

"Don't know that, either."

"What's the row, then?"

"No row—he tackled."

"Yes?"

"And I—trumped, that's all."

Fishcake, through with heroics, dropped his armament and began leisurely brushing off his dusty clothes as if flecking away a mere passing trivial incident.

"Provoking!" muttered Vic.

"Exasperatingly so!" nodded Ridgely, with marked testiness. "Next time, young man, paddle your own canoe!" he added severely to Fishcake.

"What do you want for your money?" blinked the latter, innocently.

"You hailed us?"

"Of course I did."

"And——"

"Well, what?"

"The fellow's got away."

"Why didn't you stop him, then?" inquired Fishcake, benevolently.

"Humph!"

"No humph! I did the fighting part. Want me to be the whole circus! You're crack runners. Put after him, if you like—Clif has."

Clif had, and Vic looking expectant, and Ridgely bored, both darted after their comrade.

Clif had darted after the runner. He had not, like the others, wasted time waiting for explanations.

"You're as good as cross-examined, my man!" he announced, as he saw that the end of the blind alley was completely blocked up by a high iron grating.

It never stopped the runner, although the bars came so close together that they might have daunted a cat.

"Rubber! putty—boneless!" almost shouted Clif in the profoundest wonder.

The fugitive had squeezed between two bars easily as if flattening himself out thus was a mere daily exercise.

He slid to the other side, renewed his dash, turned the end of the alley, and disappeared from view silently and entirely.

Vic and Ridgely met their comrade returning from his fruitless spurt. All three came back to Fishcake.

He had gathered up the knives and put them in their receptacle.

This was a mere iron pail, and the handles of the weapons sticking up more than ever conveyed the idea of tools.

Seated on the steps, whistling softly to himself, the long plebe was examining one of the weapons critically, rubbing a finger cautiously over the trowel-like end, exquisitely keen-edged and vicious-looking.

"Who was he?" was his first bland interrogatory.

"Who was he?" repeated Clif, indignantly. "That is for you to answer, I should say!"

"Me? Huh! I don't know him."

"Come, Fishcake!" ordered Clif—"don't tantalize the fellows. What are the real merits of the case?"

"I don't know about the merits," answered Fishcake. "I was coming down the street, and I sort of edged into that doorway."

"What for?" asked Vic.

"Well, I was watching—you know how curious I

am. Farther back I had seen just such another fellow lurking with precisely just such another layout as this, and it struck me as——”

“Suspicious?” helped on Vic.

“That’s it. I didn’t like the looks of things—none of my business, but I thought I would watch him a bit. Just as I glided in here, bless me! but if right on the top step wasn’t the second fellow, fitted out just like the first.”

“With the queer kit of knives?” murmured Ridgely, curiously.

“You have it. This fellow snarled like a dog, hissed like a snake, and gave me a push. Out I rolled; but I grabbed his pail and took it with me. That’s all.”

Clif took the sample knife out of Ridgely’s hand. It was of very peculiar make.

“Belongs to a professional knife-thrower’s outfit, I should say,” commented Vic.

Clif nodded affirmatively, but thoughtfully.

“If the man hadn’t run away,” resumed Fishcake, “I might think he was some variety fellow out of a job, and merely snatching a nap.”

“But two of them!” suggested Vic.

“And where’s the other, Fishcake?” insinuated Clif.

“Oh, he’s——”

Fishcake arose to his full, tall height and peered down the street.

“There he is!” he ejaculated, excitedly.

“And more of it,” shouted Vic.

Two hundred feet away a man had hurried out from what seemed to be the rear exit of a restaurant facing on the next street.

He looked nervous, undecided, and his walk, as he started up, was a half run.

Almost immediately, just as he passed some buildings in dark shadow, a second form slid out on the

walk in his rear as noiselessly as if mounted on rubber-tired roller skates.

The four cadets regarded him with intense interest, for he was just as Fishcake had described—"equipped" precisely as had been his evident "partner" so recently put to flight.

In his left hand he carried the same small round iron pail.

Up from it stuck the handles of the "tools" it contained.

With his right hand he snakily withdrew one, and while continuing to creep silently, stealthily in the wake of the man in advance, he raised this over his shoulder with the practiced poise of an expert dart-thrower.

It left his hand, and, distant as they were, the cadets could hear, sharp and cutting as the buzzing sound of a suddenly disturbed bird, an ominous, lengthened "Whizz-zz-z!"

The man ahead must have smelled danger, for he ducked with a startled jerk.

So violent was the movement that his hat fell off. He did not halt to regain it.

As the knife missed him, and circling came down on a plank step, it sank fully three inches up to its heavily-weighted handle.

"Stop, there!" shouted Clif, vigorously, as the would-be assassin reached with prompt fingers for a second blade.

The runner in advance never turned, bulking all his energies on distancing a foe he must have identified by his terrifying warning.

The other shot a single sharp glance over his shoulder in the direction of the cadets.

He estimated distance, his chances, broke himself into a run, but his hand, as he did so, dipped and arose three times in swift succession into and away from the iron pail.

"One!"

"Two!"

"Three!"

Clif counted under his breath, and in a single breath, for the fling of the weapons was rapid as the course of flying fish at play.

"Struck!" gasped the petrified Ridgely.

Fishcake's eyes goggled. Vic could scarcely repress an utterance of wierd horror.

One after the other the three knives had landed between the shoulders of the runner in advance.

The first made him waver.

The second caused him to plunge slightly with more faulty steps.

The third brought him to a distinct halt.

And there he stood, the three knives—bored to his vitals, it seemed—glinting and balancing from their human sheath.

CHAPTER II.

THE SERPENT RING.

The man who had hurled the trowel-bladed knives did not linger to watch the victim fall.

Swinging around, he swept the street keenly, apprehensively, made out the gaping spectators, and broke into a swift run.

To be otherwise than curious, was not natural. Clif determined to overtake this man.

"Come on!" he shouted to the others.

He picked up the cap the man had lost as he passed it. It was but a second's delay, but when he looked up from stooping the runner had turned the next corner.

At the fourth turn—with no fugitive yet in view—he determined to abandon the chase.

Just then around the next corner came a ragged dancing urchin.

Putting out his hand he checked the gamboler,

who, struggling in affright, hid one arm alarmedly behind him.

"I didn't steal it!" he instantly vociferated.

"Steal what?" insinuated Clif.

"The dollar."

"Oh! you have a dollar there?"

"Yes, I have!"

"Which you just got from a man—running bare-headed?"

The boy gave a prodigious start.

"Say!" he ejaculated. "Are you one of dem mind readers?"

"Never mind—didn't you?"

"Yes."

"What for?"

"Me dicer."

"For your cap?"

"Dat's de perlite of it!"

"Which way—where—see here, do you want another dollar?"

"Got no more di—caps to sell."

"Find the man you sold the one you had to," said Clif, quickly—"that is all I want. Can you?"

"I t'inks!"

The boy wheeled like a sprite.

Memory guided him to the point of barter, and a sort of instinct on the trail after that.

Keeping slightly in advance of Clif, he interrogated one policeman, two peanut peddlers, and a boy selling papers.

The latter joined him, and there were two ferrets on the trail.

They struck a third, a boot-black—the three grimy counsellors hobnobbed like busy ants, and the merry race was continued.

"Dere you are!" said the gamin, halting flustered and proud before an open door.

It led up-stairs over a laundry and had a "rooms to rent" sign on its panels.

"You are sure of it?" pressed Clif.

"Dempsey is," retorted the youngster, indicating the third volunteer to the ranks.

Three pairs of keen eyes twinkled as Clif paid the price of curiosity he might not have pursued only for the excitement of the incident under pay.

Then he went up the stairs. At their top the door was closed. As he touched its knob the strong draught not only swept it back but also a door opposite it down a hall.

It was only a glance Clif had of the person in the lighted room beyond, but that was enough.

The occupant so hurriedly slammed the door that its key fell to the floor inside.

Clif heard him fumbling for it. Soon the door would be locked. The naval cadet believed in seizing time by the forelock on all uncertain occasions.

He glided to the door. As the key fitted he gave it a violent push and, despite a pressure, slipped into the room.

"Who are you?"

Clif made sure of his unwilling host with a good long look before he replied.

He seemed to be a young man of intelligence and refinement, but a week's growth of his beard, and coarse, ill-fitting clothing, that looked out of place, concealed the real individual in a measure.

The man had retreated half way across the room. He stood wavering there in a certain irresolute, yet defiant, pose.

"I say, what do you want?" he demanded, as Clif did not speak.

Clif had stuffed his hand in his pocket. There he had placed the recovered cap. Now he produced it.

"I have brought back your cap," he said, quietly.

"My cap!" muttered the man, turning paler, and ready, Clif saw, to disavow its ownership.

"Certainly."

"I have a cap——" began the man.

"Oh! that is one you bought from a boy," said Clif, noticing the one the man wore, two sizes too small for him. "'This is the one the knife knocked off—hold on! Don't scare! I am a friend——'"

The man had taken the alarm. He saw that Clif knew of his recent adventure—he probably feared that he was an emissary of his enemies.

At all events, with a quick glide he reached an open window.

With a quicker one he was over its sill, clutched it, slipped clear to a mere fingerhold, and then, doubtfully, anxious, threw his eyes over his shoulder to get a glimpse of how he would land.

Clif had been prompt. He could not stop the man on his way to the window, but he had him now.

Stretching out his hands he gripped the wrists of the other in a firm, sinewy clutch.

"Don't do it!" he advised.

"Unhand me——"

"Then you shan't do it!"

"Let go, I say!" hotly stormed the other.

"There's an area, and the drop is past the first floor."

The man struggled furiously.

"You!" he breathed—"be careful! If I let go I pull you with me."

"But you won't."

"But I will!"

The man had warned—now he kept his word.

He released his fingers. Clif maintained the hold on the wrists, and for an instant of time by sheer sturdy strength sustained the fellow suspended over space.

As he did this he noticed something both remarkable and enlightening.

Beyond the man's open shirt collar he caught a gleam.

The mystery of the harmless knives was explained now.

The man wore a coat of mail.

Clif realized his own peril. He could not maintain his present unnatural pose for many seconds without being pulled over the window-sill—he let go of the captive's wrists.

The hands slipped through his fingers. As they cleared it Clif closed one palm—something was in it.

“His ring—pulled clear off his finger!” exclaimed Clif. “My man! you have left behind—mercy!”

There was a crash that drowned out the cadet's call.

The falling man had struck a roof. It crushed in, but with a terrific bound he saved himself from being engulfed by the rocking, splintering boards.

Leaping free of the tumbling ruins he came down on the ground headlong with a force that ended in a thud.

Clif fancied he was stunned or had broken his neck.

The man aroused himself, however. He staggered to his feet, put his hand to his head, gazed around in a dull, dazed way.

Then raising his glance he caught sight of Clif lifting himself over the window sill to descend.

With a startled, hunted cry the fugitive took to flight.

Clif slipped ring and cap into his pocket, and went below to the laundry.

Its owner knew nothing about his lodger up-stairs except that he had rented the room for two days, paid in advance—as he had no luggage—had acted in a very secretive and retired manner, and his time was up that evening.

Clif hung around the vicinity for a brief period, then ran across his fellow cadets trying to find him, and all hands returned to the academy.

“A queer affair,” commented Ridgely, as they went over its details in Clif's room.

Clif advanced no theories.

When the others had gone, however, he carefully put away for safekeeping the cap the fugitive had dropped.

He knew its owner's name, for he had found it written in red ink inside the leather lining.

It was: "Adrian Grenoble."

The ring he examined most curiously.

It was a large, broad circlet.

Its top was a coiling snake formed of tiny turquoises, with a head represented by a finely cut reddish stone, sunk in which were two eyes of limpid diamond flame.

Clif Faraday slipped the ring on his finger.

CHAPTER III.

A DEAD-CENTER SHOT.

"Squad A!"

"That's us!" declared Fishcake.

"Attention!"

"Do you hear, Clif—attention! not to that pretty girl yonder, but to the guns."

"Target practice! Faraday, show your paces!"

The commands were official—the added whispered hint quite off-handed.

For over an hour the various squads had executed the dashing series of evolutions that always attracted and held the attention of Bessie Stuart and Tess Herndon.

These two belles of Annapolis were Clif Faraday's most charming lady friends, but they were not the only feminine spectators of the martial maneuvers in progress.

A gay bevy clustered where the reviewing officers overlooked proceedings.

Simply overlooked, on this especial occasion, how-

ever, for the cadets, while at work, were also "on show."

It was whispered that some people of considerable national importance were among the throng—an ex-vice president, two senators, and quite a sprinkling from the diplomatic corps.

Clif had observed several very noticeable strangers among them.

Fishcake's challenge, in fact, was caused by the persistency with which Clif regarded a trio that had somewhat interested him.

This consisted of a white-haired old gentleman, who listened to the firing and the comments with bowed head and helpless inquiry in his face, and who was manifestly blind.

Hovering over him constantly was one of the most beautiful young women Clif had ever seen.

She seemed devoted to him—the expression of her gentle face was almost angelic.

Every time, however, that she met the glance of the tall eye-glassed man, who sat beside her father, it seemed as if a cloud passed over her face.

This man was an evident foreigner, for he wore fierce mustachios, was swarthy, and all kinds of medals and decorations lined the lappel of his half military coat.

Upon him the blind old man seemed to depend as on a son, and his sightless face smiled constantly in his direction.

Clif read in the ensemble thus presented, or fancied that he read—one of those pathetic human histories that conceal more than they show on the surface.

"The girl dislikes the man, the father favors him," he ruminated. "They look wealthy and refined, the foreigner quite distinguished. Is it another of those cases of American wealth and beauty against a foreign title?"

But Clif's theorizing was promptly checked by the call of duty.

The officer in charge had given the word for action, and the squad moved forward to take its place behind the new practice gun.

Over across a cindered reach the marines adjusted the massive target, the "all ready" signal sounded out.

The loading, sighting, deft handling of the gun—as delicately as if the works of a watch were under manipulation—all this was engrossing to the admiring spectators.

Fishcake's lank form, Nanny's extreme littleness, Punkins' plump budding face—all lost personality for the moment.

Grim and silent as expert gunners at work, where the loss of a second, the deviation of a tenth of an inch in sighting, meant ruin or victory, Clif's gallant aides performed their duties like well-trained parts of a magically sure and swift machine.

Three shots had cut the air to strike the target in swift succession—outer rim, inner rim, square dead center, as Vic Rollins had delightedly announced.

The roar and majesty of the guns had something magical to attract, and Clif observed that the superintendent and several others, conversing with the foreign-looking gentleman in company with the blind old man and the beautiful young lady, were looking his way, and apparently discussing the ordnance equipment quite animatedly.

The group seemed to be referring some question of opinion to the eye-glassed stranger.

The cool, imperious way in which the latter responded, and the airy wave of his hand, gave Clif an idea, somehow, that he posed as an expert in gunnery.

"They are coming this way," he said to his nearby companions.

"Yes—wonder who he is," murmured Vic.

"A consequential kind of a guy in his own estimation, I can see that," said Fishcake.

"I'll find out who he claims to be," volunteered Nanny.

The diminutive plebe edged out of the crowd and into another one in his usual burrowing, ferret-like way.

He came back with mock alarm and seriousness of face and manner.

"Gitsmachoff powskystephanovitch malahalinski purtch—putschk-abalavobosky!" he spluttered.

"Eh!" stared Pun'kin.

"What's got you?" demanded Fishcake, with fierceness.

"Rooshian!" projected Nanny, with an explanatory wriggle of his face, as if he was swallowing quinine.

"Russian, is he?" murmured Clif.

"They say so—and a big gun, too."

"How big?" queried Pun'kin.

"Lieutenant-general of naval artillery in the Russian navy."

"Whew!"

"Son of the ex-minister of the Russian marine."

"H'm!"

"Souvalief—Alexis, first name. Middle names: Kun-Nimin, Tsharogeika, Rousalka, Petrovarch —"

"Daddle do!" said Kafoozelum.

"Yes, that will do, Nanny," nodded Clif. "And what is Lieutenant-general of Naval Artillery Alexis Souvalief doing here?"

"On his way to Washington to join the diplomatic corps there."

"I see."

"Interested in everything naval."

"Naturally."

"So, took in Annapolis and the academy. Particular guest of that old blind man."

"Who is he?"

"Millionaire Morton of Minnesota—great grain king."

"That his daughter, you know?" blurted Chauncey De Launcey, a born worshipper of royalty and cash, and the exquisite of the class.

"Just so, you know!" mimicked Nanny. "No sheep's eyes, Chauncey! You're irresistible, of course, but they say Miss Morton and Souvalief are engaged."

"Sorry for it!" said blunt Fishcake. "She don't look happy, and he don't look——"

"Square!" supplemented Vic, with a vigorous nod, as his comrade hesitated. "You're just right, Fishcake. He's got shifty eyes and a mean nose, and that kills anybody."

"Attention!" came officially, putting all hands on a routine good-behavior basis.

"Do the honors, Faraday, if necessary," reached Clif, and Clif bowed.

They were keen observers—that bright, vigilant coterie of cadets—and Clif mentally echoed Fishcake's opinion of the center of the advancing group.

To Clif's way of seeing, the Russian had the hollow ring of base metal clear through.

If he was a genuine aristocrat, he had come up from very low depths—and not very remotely, either.

There was a false, snaky glitter behind the gold-mounted eyeglasses, and while the fellow affected only a languid interest in what was said and shown, Clif could have sworn that all the time he was keeping a tremendously guarded watch over himself.

"Bogus, as a gentleman!" insinuated Vic in Clif's ear.

"I don't think much of the Russian navy!" whispered Nanny.

"We are interested, General Souvalief, in the new artillery experience of your gifted countryman, Vou-riki," the superintendent was saying.

"Indeed! indeed!" smiled the Russian. "Yes, Vouriki, my warm personal friend—in fact, I may say my protege—is quite a rising star."

"Vouriki's system, I believe," continued the commandant, "embraces the principle of the oblique guns?"

"Quite so," rather slowly assented the Russian—and dubiously, too, shrewdly watching Clif fancied.

The fellow had one nervous trait amid all his composure.

Just as some men will continuously stroke the mustache, bite their finger nails, juggle a toothpick, twirl their thumbs, this man could not resist toying with his necktie.

It was a mere narrow silken string.

Clif noticed the nervous maneuver more particularly because the man had a most deft and curious way of tying the string into a most complicated and unique bow.

The knot that Souvalief manipulated was done so swiftly that Clif could not help but admire.

It presented a "new wrinkle" that he wanted "to get onto"—for Clif was progressive—so he was vigilantly attentive.

"That's cute!" commented Vic, watching also.

"The knot?" interrogated Clif.

"Exactly."

"Yes—a sort of triple diamond."

"How does he do it?"

"Practice, of course—we'll put in an hour or two on it this evening."

"See how it's done?"

"I think so."

"Store it away, then, and we'll paralyze the crowd with our proficiency!"

"Yes," spoke Souvalief—quite in front of Clif just here—"the Vouriki system is to slant the piece."

"Carriage and all?" inquired the superintendent.

"No," answered the Russian. "I believe an apparatus connects with the elevating and depressing gearing——"

"Take care, sir!"

Clif spoke involuntarily, and as he did so he shot out a quick hand.

In a flash something enlightening occurred to him, too.

The Russian was either a daring and a careless fellow, or a perfectly blunderheaded ignoramus.

In showing what he meant, he had moved his hand across the new practice gun.

Instead of doing so at its right side, he heedlessly fingered the operating gear.

One snap of the delicate catch, and the cogs and wheels would have moved the lever.

Clif, in the urgency of danger, the impulsive desire to save from harm, had almost roughly swept the languid, shapely hand of the Russian aside.

Sonvalief flushed angrily, and stared with haughty severity at the naval cadet.

"How dare you?" he began.

"Your hand," Clif tried to explain.

"Sir!"

"If you had touched the snap, your whole arm would have been dragged into the crank and crushed."

"I did not notice——" stammered the Russian, and there he came to a dead stop.

Clif's hand still obtruded to keep him from mischief.

On Clif's hand was the serpent ring he had secured so strangely from the imperilled stranger at the window of the obscure hotel the night previous—the man who had so narrowly escaped the trowel-shaped knives.

The Russian's eyes fell to this, were glued to it.

Then an extraordinary thing happened.

His utterance was checked in a harsh, sudden choking gasp.

His jaws dropped as if a violent internal wrench had dislocated them.

His eyes gave a spasmodic twitch.

With a stagger he swayed, bent as if broken in two and lay a lifeless burden in the quickly outstretched arms of the academy superintendent.

CHAPTER IV.

CHAUNCEY'S SWEETHEART.

"It's a queer go."

"Yes, lightly mystifyng, Vic."

"What are you going to do about it, Clif?"

"Just wait."

"For what?"

"Developments."

The two chums and fellow cadets sat in their room on the fourth floor of cadet quarters as they conversed.

The grand day of excitement and interest was drawing to a close.

Bessie Stuart's happy smile and Tess Herndon's proud handwave of congratulation as he carried off the honors were worth treasuring up, but the sudden crisis at the Russian's explanation of how they handled artillery in the Czar's navy obscured that remembrance—stood out in red letter prominence all by itself.

"It was a queer go!" repeated Vic Rollins, discussing the episode now. "The Russian went down like a shot!"

"Because," assented Clif, gravely—"because he saw that ring on my finger."

"That belonged to the man you chased last night?"

"Yes."

"And you think the Russian recognized it?"

"I know he did."

Vic looked convinced, but unsatisfied.

"The reason why I think that it was a sight of the ring that made the man drop," continued Clif, "is because when Souvalief opened his eyes after fainting away he muttered a name."

"You heard him?"

"I did."

"And that name——" insinuated Vic.

"'Adrian Grenoble.'"

"The name of the man from whose hand into yours the ring slipped!"

"The same."

"Then there is a connection!" declared Vic.

"Palpably."

"But what?"

"Time will tell, circumstances demonstrate."

"They say Souvalief leaves for Washington in a day or two?"

"After a reception given in his honor, yes."

"Then he carries away the mystery of this affair, and we shall never find out anything more about it!"

"I do not think so," dissented Clif, in a sanguine tone, that made Vic more inquisitive than ever.

"Won't you explain?"

"There is not much to explain. It seems that some one has been around among the cadets during the day making inquiries."

"About what?"

"Myself."

"Who was it?"

"A man, I am satisfied, who is a friend or servant of this Russian."

"What did he want to know?"

"Who I was. Then he narrowed inquiry down to my jewelry. Then he guardedly alluded to this ring itself. I am very sorry I wore it. Somehow, Chaun-

The gloating, expectant Nanny—piloting the way—halted them at a fence surrounding a small picnic grounds.

"Now, then, you fellows, order and caution!" commanded the irrepressible little mischief-maker, proudly conscious of his leadership.

"What's the joke?" asked a cadet who had not been let into the inner ring.

"You'll soon see. Just follow, and keep mum till I give the signal."

"What for?"

"To—celebrate."

"And then——"

"Bust!"

Nanny led the way through one or two mazes of shrubbery, and halted his contingent behind the loose boards that had formed the stop for air rifle practice.

Cracks an inch wide were soon utilized, and twinkling eyes ranged along the interstices.

A rare sight met the view of the fluttering mob—Chauncey was in evidence.

One or two he had confidently informed that he had a date with his mysterious correspondent for that afternoon, and had told them where.

She was to meet him and reveal her name, and Chauncey guessed that she would turn out to be "that pretty niece of the mayor," or the daughter of a retired capitalist summering down the bay at Steeple Point.

Chauncey had sneaked from the academy to meet his appointment in a very secretive way, and all hands now divined why.

He had come to the academy with an idea that "everything went," including the civilian attire of "Paree," the loud checked oddities of his "Lun'-non" career—for Chauncey claimed to have been the leading social swell of two seasons in those hustling capitals.

With all his Anglicized noodle notions, however, Chauncey had sense enough to give up many a daring break for making a show of his wardrobe before the guying cadets.

The present occasion seemed to him to be just the time to utilize all his disregarded finery to impress the fancy of an infatuated sweetheart.

Chauncey wore—instead of the natty, becoming cadet cap—a plug hat!

Somewhere in the academy he had got hold of a relic show sword—gaudy and glittering with glass and gilt—the regulation one was not good enough for the occasion.

He had adopted a monocle, wore a gigantic chrysanthemum in his buttonhole, and yellow kid gloves.

It was the silk tile that gave the grotesque flavor to the make-up—it overshadowed everything else, Chauncey himself included.

The contrast of the sable, shiny, bell-like head-piece to the rest of Chauncey's attire was so great that his top-heavy appearance, as Nanny gleesomely declared, was simply "killing!"

"Where's the girl?" questioned Fishcake, in a whisper.

"Wait! she's coming," responded Nanny.

There she was, with the words.

Down the path came tripping a conglomeration of color and sprightliness that made the knowing ones think of a rainbow, and the unknowing ones of a fairy.

"Stunning, all the same!" commented one of the latter.

Chauncey stood there on a quiver, ecstatically viewing this seraphic vision of lace, frills, and gracefulness.

He made a bow that nearly broke his back. The shy charmer—by accident or design—ran into his plug hat.

It scrunched, a wreck, and he dropped it, and

Nanny behind the scenes winked solemnly and enunciated:

"So shy and confused, you know!"

"Yah!" choked Pun'kin.

"Muzzle him!" ordered Nanny, quickly, "or he'll give the whole snap away!"

One cadet sat on the fat plebe while another clapped a hand over his mouth.

Chauncey had escorted his charmer to a seat. He kept his hand on his heart, and looked important.

A heavy veil had the face of his inamorata, but she was that shy—and confused—that she kept her fan shielding, too.

"Poor, happy, blushing face!" groaned Fishcake.

"Wow!" suffocated Pun'kin, and they chucked his head in the mud.

Chauncey had dropped to one knee—he had put his silk handkerchief under it.

He had taken the dainty gloved hand in his own.

"Now for the oratorical effort of his life!" whispered Nanny.

"Oh, ma!" blatted Pun'kin, at the point of expiring.

"What was that?" pronounced Chauncey, arising suddenly to his feet. "Ah! perchance the bur-ruds!" he continued, languishingly—"the little bur-ruds, come forth from their little wurruld of love and joy and happiness!"

Chauncey gave his sword an upward swing—it struck the canopy of the band stand.

A bunch, a heap, a nest aloft was disturbed by the valiant stroke.

It dropped.

CHAPTER V.

THE MYSTERIOUS PACKAGE.

"Blazes!" flared Fishcake.

"The deuce!" echoed Nanny.

"Murder!" yelled Chauncey.

The languishing lover had precipitated a catastrophe, and all his martial ardor oozed out like magic.

The bunch that his valiant blade had cut loose was a hornet's nest, and it fell directly on top of Chauncey's bare head.

A dozen industrious insects bumped out, got at work, and with a yell Chauncey dodged back to a safe distance.

It had not been in Nanny's programme—this unexpected climax—and the little plebe looked startled.

The "lady" of the play, assailed by a swarm of pestering, piercing torments, began to act in a decidedly unladylike manner.

It was probably her cue to glide after her daunted hero, cling to him, and appeal to him to "save her!"

Chauncey, however, was only thinking of saving himself on the present occasion.

Slashing out with the sword wildly, he had backed as far as he could go, and there he stood looking half scared to death.

Then his concern, deep seated as it was, gave place to a kind of startling wonderment that overspread his face like a pall.

His innamorata was only human, and she began slapping out at the hornets more like a good fellow than a fragile, delicate summer maiden!

She began kicking out, too, and inside of five seconds she was thrashing around like a prize fighter.

Suddenly she must have got a sting that overcame all scruples.

Such a roar burst from her silvery throat that Chauncey's knees bent under him as if he had seen a gentle canary suddenly begin to growl like an infuriated lion.

His fair companion, frenzied to the point of torture, tore the thick double veil from her face.

"W-w-what!" shrieked Chauncey.

It was a black face.

It was not a feminine face at all!

There stood revealed Hannibal, dusky henchman of the cadets, with whom he was a general favorite, sable scion of the coal-black coon of the academy kitchen.

"Cat's out!" proclaimed Fishcake, breaking from cover.

"Get in at the death!" added Nanny, also recklessly showing himself.

"Whoof!" spluttered Hannibal, in dead earnest only to escape the hornets, and abandoning all attachment to his recent role.

"You bituminous degenerate!" agonized Chauncey—"I'll slaughter you!"

"Go 'way, now!"

"I'll—I'll hack you to pieces!"

"Don't be 'diculous!"

Hannibal dodged, Chauncey swung out his weapon dangerously.

Then there was a race. The affrighted Hannibal forgot grace, and Chauncey all dignity.

"Dah's blood in de air—I feels it!" spluttered Hannibal, and put for his life.

A thorn bush caught one ample skirt.

Rippetty—rip! and half of Hannibal in overalls gave forth a striking contrast to half of Hannibal in full dress silk waist and jaunty picnic hat.

It was the funniest picture they had ever helped paint, but Chauncey De Launcey, whose rage knew

no bounds, seemed determined to streak it with an additional lurid hue.

Clif was really afraid of what might happen if in his present mad temper he came up with Hannibal.

But the dusky sprinter seemed to realize that his life hovered in the balance, and made mighty strides.

He ran to a barbed wire fence, gave a leap, tripped on the top wire, came flat on the other side, and rolling to a safe distance sat up in the ruined finery of his cousin, Susanna, making big eyes at the discomfited Chauncey, savagely hacking at the wires he dared not tempt, gritting his teeth, and foaming at the mouth in a terrifying way.

Modestly, innocent-faced, the advance guard of the cadets approached.

"Hey, Chaunce! What's the matter?" insinuated Fishcake, bland and child-like.

"Matter?"

"Introduce the lady."

"Oh! you horrid!" choked up Chauncey.

Then he glared at the crowd. For a second he meditated a sortie. But the advancing numbers daunted him.

"I'll—I'll——" he spluttered—and streaked it for home.

Clif had remained in the background. It was impossible not to be amused, but he had not urged on the sport and folly.

His mind was on the episode of the morning, and as he saw the show over—as it seemed—he turned to leave the spot and get back to the academy.

"Hold on!" suddenly halted him breathlessly.

From the opposite direction a runner dashed up.

"Hello, Joy!" hailed Clif.

"Looking for you!" panted the plebe, poking in his coat. "Important!"

"What is?"

"What I've got to give you—ran all the way."

"And what have you got to give me?"

"Package."

"Who from?"

"Boy. Said a man sent it. With this message. 'Give it to Faraday. Tell him to deliver it without delay. Matter of life and death.' I hustled."

Clif's eyes opened wide.

He looked extremely curious as the flustered messenger tugged inside his coat to bring to light a package the size of a two pound box of candy.

It was tied around tightly, and across the face of the box was a plain, clear direction:

"Mr. Clif Faraday."

This first caught the cadet's glance. Then a queer thrill traversed his frame as he noticed below, in finer writing:

"To be sent, or delivered posthaste personally, to Mr. Adrian Grenoble."

"Ah!" murmured Clif, simply, but a score of nimble thoughts began to run riot in his active mind.

Who had sent this package—what did it contain?"

Why had it been presumed by any one that he even knew Adrian Grenoble?

"See here!" said Clif, turning the package over and over in his hand, "the boy——"

"Wouldn't know him again," interrupted Joy, tersely.

"He said——"

"Just what I told you."

"Nothing more?"

"Not a lisp!"

Clif stood silent in a brief maze of wonder, doubt, suspicion.

He glanced up and singled out Vic among the crowd.

"Vic!" hailed Clif.

His chum hastened promptly to his side.

"What is it, Clif?" he asked, gazing askance from

the somber, serious face of his comrade to the package in his hand.

"I just got this," said Clif.

"What is it?"

"A box addressed to me, but intended for Mr. Adrian Grenoble."

"Why!" exclaimed Vic, with a start, "that's the man you got the serpent ring from!"

"Exactly."

"And——"

Before Clif could reply there came an interruption that startled both.

A horrifying clamor rent the air.

CHAPTER VI.

BANG!

"What's up now!" challenged Vic, turning sharply.

While Vic was guessing Clif was at the spot.

Into his coat he thrust the package just received.

"Give me that—quick!" he breathed, jostling Fishcake, who had picked up the sword Chauncey had dropped, and who stood staring into the field beyond.

It was a small, securely fenced, in annex to a farm—abutting the picnic grounds.

There were eight strands of new barbed wire. The top one was fully six feet up from the ground, the lowermost only a few inches.

To climb over, through, or under these without being "caught" was a mortal impossibility.

Chauncey De Launcey had seen this, and not being of the spry kind had allowed the object of his wrath to escape him.

Hannibal had seen it, too, and that was the reason

that just now he was in a particularly unpleasant and even perilous predicament.

To Clif—the crack sprinter, the long distance jumper of the academy gymnasium—height mattered little.

A brief run, a sure spring, and he cleared the top barbed strand as if he were leaping a two-foot hurdle.

What had happened to Hannibal was what might have happened to anybody in that little field with a speck of red about him.

It was stoutly enclosed because it held a brawny steer that was blooded enough to disdain ordinary hampers, and vicious enough to resent an intruder on all occasions.

Neither Hannibal nor any of the others had at first observed the animal, for it lay half concealed behind a pile of hay.

The great brute espied Hannibal, however, the minute he began to take off the silk waist—about all that now remained of his feminine disguise.

Miss Seraphina Buckner, his pumpkin-colored cousin, was “a high born lady,” it seemed, for she lined her garments with red silk.

It dangled from his arm now. Luring tantalizers, they seemed purposely set to enrage the steer. It veered its course to put anew after the flying Hannibal. The flying Hannibal put for the other side of the field.

“Keep running!” reached his ears in clarion warning, and the dancing whites of his eyes glittered hopefully as he made out the speaker.

Whack!

Clif never stopped as his feet landed after the spring through the air.

He posted on, for he realized the peril of the dusky fugitive. He caught up with the steer, dealt it a sounding whack on the flank with the flat edge of the sword.

The animal turned. This gave Hannibal a breathing chance.

"See that post?" cried Clif.

"I sees it!" gasped Hannibal.

"Climb it."

"Mistah Faraday——"

"Climb it!"

The post in question was a slanting timber sunk deep in the ground, on top of which rested the crumbling ruins of a large dove cote.

As Hannibal shinned up it the steer turned fiercely upon Clif.

The movement was sudden and terrific, and the naval cadet had scarcely time to prepare fully for the onslaught.

There was just one thing he could do: Present the point of the sword.

Unhesitatingly upon it pounced the animal.

Whing! the steel bent almost back to the handle.

Snap!—Clif Faraday's sturdy muscle was more powerful than the tempered steel. The blade broke off at the haft—the point burrowed hanging in the animal's tough hide.

Clif made a dodge. He glanced at Hannibal.

"Good!" hailed Clif—"room for two?"

Hannibal had climbed eight feet. There the cote floored. He reached over its extending edge, drew himself up, crashed aside a whole rotten shingled section of the frail structure, and was safely squatted.

Clif was beside him in a jiffy—breathless, but taking things quite calmly.

The steer was goring at the post, but it barely quivered.

"Attention, out there!" called Clif to the gaping cadets in safety range.

"Hello!" hailed back Fishcake.

"Going to leave us here all night?"

"Come down!" invited Nanny.

"Oh, no!"

"I'll get Chawnce to come and help you."

"Come, busy yourselves, or I will come down!"

"And he will!" declared Nanny, convincedly.

"Hold on, Clif—we'll get a big rope and trocadero his steership!"

"All right."

"Bump, yo varmint!" called Hannibal tauntingly down to the steer, which was hurling its great head and horns against the post in mad, baffled anger. "Hi! hole on, sah! Mistah Faraday! wh's de trub-bel?"

Clif had given a start, uttering an ejaculation of sharp concern.

One hand groping within his coat, as he instantly missed something that ought to have been there, he slightly pushed Hannibal aside.

The latter saw that the move was the precursor of a contemplated descent.

"Sah! Mistah Faraday!" he vociferated. "'Scuse!" as he pulled Clif's sleeve detainingly, "but yo' mustn't, 'deed you mustn't!"

"Let go, Hannibal," urged Clif. "I must get down!"

"Say! doan' do it! Dat ole Satan playing 'possum!"

The steer had moved from the post and was snuffing the ground, but with leery, blood-shot eyes fixed malevolently upon the two refugees.

Clif's own glance scanned the hoof disturbed grass all about the spot.

He tried to be calm, but he was not so in fact and verity.

Clif had lost the package that had been brought to him by Dismal Joy just before he had hastened to the rescue of his present comrade in elevated exile.

When and where he did not exactly know until he had started audaciously below to find out.

"I see it!" he whispered to himself, and the discovery caused him a decided flutter.

There it lay, as it must have dropped from his possession in wielding the sword to fight off the angry animal.

It was not twenty feet away from the post. Clif would have been content to let it remain where it was for the present had he not observed that it lay right in the course of the roving, unrestful steer.

"I have lost something, Hannibal," he told his companion.

"Yo's lost yo'self ef yo' draps dah below, sah!" expostulated Hannibal.

"And I must recover it——"

Clif paused both in speech and progress. At that moment the steer had come across the little package.

It sniffed it, turned it over with its muzzle, stamped at it, receded, and fixed a lurid eye upon it.

With a rush it poised its horns toward it spear fashioned, and made a pounce.

Sideways one bony prong struck it, lifted it.

Whiz!

Clif could scarcely credit such hurling force to such a rounding horn surface.

The package, however, went spinning like a projectile fired from a bomb.

It met the post about three feet up from the ground with a square flat splatter.

Then—

Bang!

———

CHAPTER VII.

THE TRIPLE DIAMOND KNOT.

"Burr-rr!"

Hanniabl's eyes opened to their widest, his teeth came together with a slam, and he threw up his hands to shield his head from a fusilade of wooden fragments.

"De world cracked wide open!" he bellowed—"we's drapped!"

Clif felt the post bend as if split in two, and over slanted the cote, a shattered mass of ruins.

The affrighted Hannibal resigned himself to the drift of circumstances, but the naval cadet saw what was coming and prepared to meet it.

"Jump!" he ordered, but his dusky comrade heeded not, and Clif alone sprang free of the falling wreck.

About the same moment that Hannibal struck the ground almost directly on the top of his head, Clif landed safely—though somewhat shocked—on both feet.

A bewildering sight met his astonished view.

Hannibal lay motionless, the steer in mad affright was scudding for the far end of the enclosure, one-half of the post stood up only—the rest of it, and the cote, lay a mass of scattered kindling wood.

The post had been snapped off, cut off—blown off, Clif now saw at a swift, keen glance—as if it had been a mere pipestem.

Vic had passed the fence—the others were beating down the wires to follow.

"Clif—you are not hurt?" pressed the former, quite pale with solicitude.

"No."

"What has happened?"

"You saw better than I."

"A flare! a shock as if heaven and earth were rent asunder!"

"Precisely, but do you know what it was?" queried Clif, rapidly.

"I couldn't see exactly.

"The package I told you about."

"The package?"

"It—went off!"

Just that had happened, and Clif was half dazed, despite his strong mind, as he realized it.

The ground beyond the post bore a hole that resembled an excavation—sprinkling it was a section of the timber reduced to mere fine sawdust.

"Dynamite!" Clif told himself, and shuddered.

He had to meet and appease the crowding, anxious, curious mob of cadets—some of them so excited that they trembled.

The steer had found some explosive carelessly fallen into its path, Clif hinted—result, a miraculous escape.

Clif gave a keen look at all that remained of the mysterious package, and thrust it out of view to evade inquiring eyes.

He allowed the others to get ahead, as a move was made in the direction of the academy.

There was nothing more to keep them on a spot that had given them their fill of excitement since sunset.

Managing to gradually trail far behind the others, Clif halted his friend and himself.

Vic had noticed Clif's nervous face many times during the past few minutes.

He was waiting for just this moment to be alone with his chum and fellow cadet.

"I'm dying with suspense, Clif," he avowed—"what have you to tell me?"

"That box was an infernal machine," said Clif.

"Sure thing!"

"Sent with murderous intent."

"Against you?"

"No—against the man it was addressed to, in my care."

"Adrian Grenoble?"

"Yes."

"But you didn't know where he was?"

"I was supposed to know by those who sent the box."

"Ghouls are at work!" proclaimed Clif, solemnly.

"They ought to be run down and strung up, then! Why, this is worse than the trowel-shaped knives!"

"The two crimes connect."

"And if we knew who was behind it all——"

"We do know," asserted Clif, impressively.

"Ah!" fluttered Vic, his eyes snapping.

"Yes. At least we may know the identity of the person who sent that box."

"That is everything. Who is he?"

"The man," said Clif, steadily, putting his hand in his pocket and drawing it out again—"the man who tied that knot."

"Clif," fairly shouted the electrified Vic, as his companion exhibited the string that had surrounded the box package.

In a flash he read what Clif had read.

"You see?" insinuated Clif.

"The knot? Yes!" answered Vic, huskily.

"It is the triple diamond knot."

"The same employed in tying his necktie——"

"By the visiting Russian general, Souvalief, exactly!" nodded Clif.

"He sent that package!"

"Vic," pronounced Clif, convincedly, "he sent it. I reason that this Grenoble is an enemy whom he fears, whom he hired the knife-throwers to kill. They failed. Souvalief saw the ring, recognized it as belonging to Grenoble. He had his servant investigate how I got it. Chawncey De Lawncey told, with imaginary details. Souvalief thought I knew who Grenoble was. He abjured me to deliver that box as involving life and death, and that I would place it in Grenoble's hands speedily. It would have annihilated him."

Clif was indignant at the peril to which ruthless hands had exposed his fellow cadets and himself, solicitous for the welfare of the fugitive, Adrian Grenoble, most of all anxious to learn more of the

blind millionaire's beautiful daughter, to whom Souvalief was said to be engaged.

Clif said nothing further as they started for the academy, but Vic knew that the formidable clew he had secured as to the identity of the sender of the infernal machine—the triple diamond knot—Clif was determined to run down.

There were routine duties to attend to, and for two hours they did not see much of one another.

"Clif is going to the city," Vic decided, and held himself in readiness to accompany him, hoping he would be asked.

He came quite eagerly into their room after the evening hour of study.

"Got permission for the evening off, Clif?" he hazarded.

"I have not!" answered Clif, with a set, ominous contraction of his firm lips.

Vic indulged in a brief, low whistle.

"That's queer!" he commented.

"Yes, it is, in fact," admitted Clif.

"You generally get what you ask for."

"The superintendent is away, and could not be asked."

"But his representative?"

"One of the instructors is in charge. He refused temporary leave of absence, peremptorily."

"You don't say so!"

"And was crabbed about it, too."

"What's up, Clif?"

"Chawncey De Lawncey."

"Eh?"

"Yes," explained Clif, quite testily, "that precious marlpot has got the whole class under suspicion. It seems, when he came home from that 'sweetheart' sell, he proceeded to get himself in fighting trim, by somewhere and somehow getting hold of a bottle of wine."

"That's his crowd, every time!" said Vic, with vigor.

"But it is not ours, and I told the officer so. Chawncsey was making a show of himself, and had to be locked up—won't tell where he got the liquor, and the entire Fourth Class is to be laid under strict embargo until the source of supply is ascertained."

"Did you tell that it was important that we—that is, you—go to the city?" inquired Vic.

"It was useless, so—we will go anyway."

Vic roused up.

"We?" he insinuated.

"Yes, I want you with me."

"You mean to take French leave?"

"I mean to do as a duty what we all do as a lark many a time," answered Clif, producing from his clothes bag an exquisitely made ladder of rope and steel that had served for more than one surreptitious scaling of the academy walls. "I am going to face this Souvalief."

"Do you know where he is?"

"That I will probably have no difficulty in finding out."

"And accuse him?"

"Ask me that two hours from now, Vic," said Clif, "and I can probably answer you more definitely."

"I understand," nodded Vic. "You never make a rash break, and never will. We are going scouting, so to speak. When you have got the enemy cornered you will know just what to do."

These two hours were interesting ones for Vic Rollins, for they were replete with adventure.

He knew his energetic chum so well that he was confident that before the evening was over some pretty enlivening developments would be forced to the surface.

Getting away from quarters, over the sentry-guarded wall, to a hotel where the cadets always

felt at home, a sort of city rallying place—this progress was attained with no especial hindrance.

At the hotel Vic was told to remain in waiting, and Clif sped away on some mission bent that he did not see fit to explain nor did Vic ask.

Clif looked more grim and serious than ever when he reappeared.

"Come on," he said, not even sitting down to rest.

"Found out something, Clif?" intimated Vic.

"All I need to know."

"Have you seen the Russian?"

"We are going to see him now."

"Ah!"

"He is at a ball."

"At a ball?" repeated Vic, wonderingly.

"Yes," said Clif. "From what I learn he is to leave Annapolis immediately after it. We can't afford to let him get away without an explanation," went on Clif, significantly.

"Then you intend——"

"To go to the ball, too."

"Eh?" startled Vic, and suggestively looked down their careless undress front.

"Oh! it is a masque ball, I forgot to explain," said Clif.

"Then——"

"We must go in costume."

"How are you going to get in?"

"Did you ever know of a place an Annapolis naval cadet couldn't get into when he had made up his mind?"

"Your sort never! that's so," nodded Vic, emphatically.

Thirty minutes later Vic Rollins stood looking at himself in a full length mirror and at his companion before a second one, at a costumer's establishment to which Clif had promptly led him upon leaving the hotel.

Clif wore a cavalier's cloak, sword, wig, long, drooping hat, and mustachios.

Vic made up very comfortably as a hosed and doubletten mynheer of early Holland.

A light eye mask perfected an assumption that was in a measure a most successful disguise.

Ten minutes later a handsome carriage driven by two spirited bays, secured at a livery stable near by, landed the naval cadets in style grand and resplendent at the doors of one of the most aristocratic mansions on Maryland Avenue.

CHAPTER VIII.

CHALLENGED!

A sharp quiver traversed Clif Faraday's frame, but it was no tremor of his own well regulated nerves.

It was communicated by a white dainty handkerchief that momentarily rested in his own during the evolutions of a quadrille, and the naval cadet's eyes snapped intelligently behind his silken mask.

"Miss Morton—the blind millionaire's daughter!" murmured Clif, and the daring, gritty hero favorite of Annapolis academy knew that he had scored point one!

There had been no difficulty in passing the stately butler at the spacious doors of the brightly illuminated mansion.

Then Clif and Vic had separated, and now, at that quick hand quiver at a sharp, gasping breast of his partner in the formal dance, Clif guessed who she was, and guessed aright.

For the eyes shrinking beneath the delicate mask were fixed on the ring on Clif's finger—the snake circlet that had that morning produced so vivid an effect upon the Russian general, Souvalief.

"Miss Morton?" ventured Clif, and deftly drew his partner to one side, for she began to sway as if about to faint.

"Yes! yes!" panted the fluttering voice. "Tell me—oh! lead me somewhere—I—must rest!"

He felt her tremble as he led her away from the whirling maskers and to a part of the conservatory where utter seclusion promised.

"You—you——" she began, hesitatingly, as Clif sat down beside her.

"Am only a naval cadet!"

"Oh! what shall I say?" reached Clif's keen hearing in the faintest of murmurs.

"What shall I?" spoke Clif, boldly, determined to use no ceremony in reaching a crisis that was necessary. "Miss Morton, let us not play at cross purposes! You are in distress—I am hoping to be of friendly service to you."

"But—why? How? Just one question: that ring?"

"Listen!"

Time was limited—at any moment there might be an interruption.

To forestall it Clif kept his eyes fixed on the conservatory archway, while he rapidly, clearly, frankly told all of his strange connection with that strange circle of gold and gems.

Before he was half way through he was convinced of two facts: Miss Morton dreaded, despised the Russian general—she loved the fugitive, Adrian Grenoble.

"What shall I do—oh, what shall I do?" she faltered, wringing her hands in indescribable anguish.

"Return confidence for confidence."

"I am powerless—it would break my father's heart! This man an assassin! And poor Adrian! poor Adrian!"

"You must enlighten me if you wish me to help you," urged Clif, decisively. "That is better—con-

trol yourself—I am treasuring every word—do not hesitate—it is not too late—I will save you—zounds!”

That last word was spoken to himself by Clif Faraday, and with its utterance he arose and the courtly gentleman supreme handed his fair companion over to a recent partner who had come in search of her.

It was Souvalief, and from behind his mask his evil eyes took in the naval cadet with a dangerous glare ere he led Miss Morton back to the dancing room.

Clif stood where he had been left behind—impressed, amazed in doubt.

Ringling yet in his ears the fluttering, fervent story the agitated girl had told seemed difficult to analyze, startling in the extreme.

A form flitted past the archway, peered in, and Vic was by the side of his cadet friend.

“Found out anything?” he pressed, quickly.

“Everything!”

“That was the millionaire’s daughter?”

“That was Miss Morton,” assented Clif. “Vic, we have a hard combination to tackle!”

“Explain?”

“A year ago, while the blind millionaire was in Europe, he was rescued, helpless, from a burning building, by General Souvalief.”

“There couldn’t have been much risk!” muttered Vic.

“There was. It was a heroic deed. Mr. Morton, being blind—never saw his rescuer; in fact, never met him again, for Souvalief was merely hastily passing through the city. But he never forgot him; wrote him, thanking him, offered him half his fortune. He returned to Annapolis. Traveling with his daughter, a week ago in Annapolis, here the Russian suddenly appeared. Mr Morton was overjoyed to be reminded of his debt of gratitude. He welcomed him

as a son—he wishes him for a son. He has ordered his daughter to marry him.”

“And she loves another?”

“Adrian Grenoble.”

“And he——”

“Her father’s former secretary, was accused of forgery in Baltimore a few days since, and Miss Morton supposed, was in custody there till I explained about the ring.”

“Clif, what do you make out of it all?”

“Nothing further than that Souvalief has put a rival out of the way by false arrest, and when he escaped and reappeared here, employed his minions to kill him.”

“A summary, blood-thirsty species of wretch he must be!”

“We know that, Miss Morton believes it, but her father never would, and the public would mistrust our story. It seems that Souvalief has a yacht here. After the ball he is to convey her father and herself on a cruise to Cambridge, where they are to be quietly married.”

“Are you going to stop him?”

Clif Faraday’s eyes gave a resolute snap.

“I shall try!” he answered. “Do not be seen with me. The Russian noticed that Miss Morton was agitated. He gave me a dangerous look. Be vigilant, watch around for his friends if any are here. I will keep track of Miss Morton, and think out some plan to act on before the evening is over.”

Vic glided away. Clif lingered a moment or two. Then, to his surprise, he saw Vic hastily recross the archway space and half conceal himself behind a large flowering palm.

Almost immediately two other forms entered the place.

One was the man who had just led Miss Morton away—Souvalief—the other appeared to be some friend.

Vic thrilled—he had never yet seen Clif quite so stern, so uncompromising, so strangely set in his own way, and that way scarcely in harmony with American ethics of self-defense.

“Clif!” he again whispered—“the academy!”

“I am maintaining its honor.”

“The superintendent—the rules—duelling—don’t!”

“I will resign from the academy!”

Souvalief slipped away from the conservatory for a moment, evidently to have some word with his fiancée.

By a side entrance, taking in the dressing room on the way, the quartette departed from the bright mansion into the dark night, bent on a grim mission.

Two in front, two behind, in rapid lockstep, challenging party and challenged moved silently along.

The Russian piloted the way—he turned into a dark street, crossed an almost vacant half square, diverged where a lane jutted in fifty yards from the main thoroughfare, and to Clif’s surprise, halted in front of an isolated stone building that seemed to have once been a shop or storehouse.

“Why do you bring us here?” demanded the naval cadet, suspiciously.

“Because it is a better place for our purpose than a public hotel,” snapped the Russian. “You are afraid?”

“Afraid! Proceed! If it was dark and deadly as your prison dens of Siberia, I would follow you—now.”

There was a light in a rear part of the building—it shone slightly through the chinks of a blind, but Souvalief did not knock.

He approached a heavy door, unlocked it, lit a lamp, and the quartette stood in a bare, bleak room, about twenty feet square.

Souvalief proceeded to a closet. He removed

thence a long, light box. This he threw on the floor.

He tipped its cover with his foot. Then the cadets observed that it held swords, foils, practice gloves—an outfit conglomerate and probably Russian.

"One word!" spoke Souvalief, as he picked up one of the swords and set its point in the floor, "I do not know you—and I ask once again, your name?"

Clif was silent, awaiting the speaker's next words.

"I ask, further, why you were paying attentions to Miss Morton—what you said to agitate her?"

"We came here to work—not to talk!" observed Clif, coolly.

"I shall kill you, then!" hissed the Russian, stung by the sneer to the quick. "Unmask! I am Souvalief, a Russian nobleman. You are——"

"Faraday, cadet."

"Perdition!"

The word rang out as if wrenched from the man's very vitals.

As Clif removed his mask and his face stood revealed, the Russian whitened to the lips with a stupefying surprise, reeled back aghast.

Half purposely Clif had extended his palm so as to show the ring—his eyes pitiless, questioning, transfixed the frightened stare of the unnerved Souvalief.

"Now," spoke Clif, "you know me! I am the person who helped defeat the murderous intention of your hired knife-throwing bravos, who received your dynamite present for Mr. Adrian Grenoble. I have told your unhappy fiancée everything, and I am going to prove you a scoundrel to the world after I have shown that you are a coward. The swords!—they are the bully's resource in such an instance in this country, but I would face you if the weapons were red-hot iron poker!"

The Russian was terribly unnerved. Vic almost believed that clever, far-sighted Clif had counted on some way all along to carry his point of thus corner-

ing this man without engaging in the half civilized "code" of duelling.

"I—I refuse!" quavered Souvalief.

Vic regarded the shrinking, palpitating fellow in sheer surprise.

"How is this?" murmured his friend.

"He is—Faraday!"

"A cadet, it seems, yes—what of it?"

"The cadet! Do you know his reputation?" breathed Souvalief, for only his second's ears, but the cadets overheard. "A real fighter! No! Not the swords—not the swords! with him!"

Clif smiled contemptuously, Vic with a thrill of positive pride.

Souvalief had heard, then, of the all around crack champion of the academy, who had carried off first honors in a recent official gymnasium bout at the foils.

He was afraid of his opponent—Clif had kept his promise, and was proving him a coward.

"He is unworthy of my steel!" blustered the Russian, seeing that he was making a paltry figure, and seeking to conceal fear with braggadacio. "I will beat him as they do the serfs! I will not place myself amenable to the law here that frowns on cold steel. Hard fists—I will drub him!"

Instantly Souvalief snatched up a pair of gloves from the box, tossed them to Clif, and began drawing on others himself.

They were light four ounce sparring mittens, and Vic could not exactly comprehend what had tempted the Russian to so abruptly alter his tactics.

Clif was steadfast as granite—cool as an iceberg.

"Very well!" he said, simply.

Vic did not like the progress of affairs any more than he did the place and the men.

The one was sinister, forbidding—between the two some rapid undertoned words had passed.

There was a little preliminary sparring—Clif warded—the other pressed hotly.

Finally the Russian got in a blow.

It was a light one, upon the temple—a mere feather brush, Vic traced.

To his infinite amazement, however, his comrade recoiled, reeled, went down like a shot.

Clif Faraday was “knocked out!”

CHAPTER X.

A WORD TO THE WISE.

Clif lost consciousness with a shock—life came back with a thrill, but the brief section intervening was a perplexing blank.

He lay on a bare floor in darkness—his first thought was of the cause of his present situation.

“The scoundrel’s gloves were leaded!” instantly divined Clif.

Souvalief at first, haphazard, fearing he was a spy, a meddler, had sought to frighten—discovering who he really was, he had employed trickery.

The slungshot tip of the treacherous mitten had struck Clif’s temple, and here was the result.

“Now, where have they put me, and what has become of Vic?” pursued Clif. “Perhaps he is here also.”

Clif could only surmise that Vic, too, had been downed, else he would not be here, apparently a prisoner.

Clif was a prisoner, and Vic was not in the same apartment—the naval cadet after a brief investigation ascertained this.

He was not bound, but the room had a grated door and a grated window, and was strong as a jail.

“Hark!” whispered Clif to himself.

Below voices hummed vaguely, footsteps echoed.

Clif got down to apply his ear to the floor, and discovered something.

"A trap door," he traced, and managed to lift it open. "Here is a mystery."

The rough reversed lath and plastering of the ceiling beneath showed.

"I see," soliloquized Clif—"when the floor below was finished that stopped a former outlet. I must hear and see, some way!"

Clif took out his sword—it had been left with him, it seemed.

The cavalier mantle impeded, and Clif denuded himself of his masque finery and set at work on his usual brisk cadet basis solely.

Cautiously, he inserted the sword point into the plastering, his intention being to bore a tiny hole so he could peer through.

The throwing back of the trap-door rendered the voices below more clearly audible now.

"It's lit," spoke a voice. "Now, then, hustle—in three minutes she goes off!"

"And the cadet aloft goes up—in a blaze of glory!"

"And the one below—down!"

This was enlightening—Vic was also a captive, then?

It was startling, too, and as Clif comprehended that dynamite was to play another part in Souvalief's murderous projects, he was momentarily unsteadied.

He pressed the sword point too far, the plastering gave, and Clif, borne off his balance, toppled forward.

Amid a cloud of dust, a crash, a clatter, the concerned naval cadet plunged, his foot caught among the laths and beams and there he hung, midway to the floor of the room beneath.

"Destruction!"

"The cadet!"

"Squealch him!"

Three voices Clif heard, rapid, startled—three men he made out. Two he decided instantly were the knife throwers. The other was the man who had accompanied Souvalief hither.

The room was the one where the "duel" had occurred. In one corner stood an ominous appearing round object, and from it trailed a sputtering fuse.

The men had recognized their resuscitated victim, and made a combined dash for him.

Clif could not detach his foot at once. He had the sword still in his clutch, however.

Swish!

The advancing trio retreated as briskly as they advanced, at the amazing spectacle of a dangling captive dauntlessly hacking out at everything that came in his way.

The keen blade met the headgear of one of the ruffians, cutting it squarely in two as it was sent spinning.

"Get out of this!"

"Yes, the thing's primed—don't delay!"

"Fellows, we're locked in!"

"What?"

"Impossible!"

One of the men ran to a corner and seized a pail of water, flinging it over the hissing fire fuse to extinguish it.

Then the trio glared blankly at one another—in turns they tried the door.

"Treachery!" hissed one.

"Can it be possible?"

"It is possible, for it's so!" sounded a voice just outside. "You have been locked in here by the man who hired you!"

"Vic!" ejaculated Clif, in profound surprise, as he recognized the tones.

Clif gave his foot a hitch, came down sprawling, righted himself, and sweeping a clear path with his

sword reached the door, sending the pale and startled trio huddled back into a corner.

"It is you, Vic?" he hailed through the stout panels.

"That is you!" answered Vic, joyfully. "Those men?"

"Are cornered."

"You are armed?"

"Fully."

"I am going to unlock the door. Keep them at bay. All right! Now then, for a little explanation."

Vic opened the door far enough to slip through, re-secured it, planted himself against it side by side with Clif, and held a pistol to menace the perturbed and shrinking trio.

Rapidly he whispered to Clif what had occurred.

When Souvalief had dealt the treacherous blow with the leaded glove it had been a signal for his companion to jump at Vic with a club.

The latter had been left for dead in the next room.

Then Souvalief had ordered his accomplice to summon "the other two," arrange to blow up the place with their unconscious victims and "get to the yacht."

Vic had recovered. He had seen the ominous can of explosives carried into the room, he had seen Souvalief—supposedly gone—sneak back and lock the heavy door on his three confederates, and then light the fuse of a second can outside, which he—Vic—had extinguished as soon as the Russian was gone.

"You three!" hailed Clif, as he took in this recital, "do you understand that while you were obeying orders to destroy us, your precious employer locked you in helplessly, intending that you should go up in the general explosion?"

One of the knaves gritted his teeth, a second hissed out a hot, vengeful malediction.

"The treacherous assassin!" snarled the third.

"We have you in check," pursued Clif, smoothly. "We have only to summon the police to send the last one of you to the penitentiary for life!"

"Sword spearing, dynamite—why! the academy crowd would lynch them!" declared Vic.

"We—we didn't put up the job!" stammered one of the three.

"No, the man did who has played you, like the snake he is, but your guilt is not lessened. What do you think of him, anyway?"

There was a triple growl—fierce, vengeful, earnest.

"Now, then," pursued Clif, "I will tell you what we are going to do with you. In the first place, tie you up securely. Vic, I cover them while you proceed."

There was a show of resistance, but speedily quelled by Clif's menacing eye, and Clif's ready weapons.

The men were tied as only an expert in "knotology"—as the average naval cadet is—could tie them.

"We shall leave you here till we find Souvalief," vouchsafed Clif. "Back to the ball, Vic."

"You'll find Souvalief at no ball!" blurted one of the men.

"Won't we?" insinuated Clif.

"Nor his lady love, nor her father," went on the fellow, sullenly.

"Where will we, then?"

"That's telling!"

"Suppose you tell?"

"Huh! To be jugged, soon as you get him? Not much!"

Clif eyed the speaker speculatively.

"My man," he said, "are you open for a proposition?"

"If it's a dead bargain!"

"No, a live one, but all your way."

"Spiel it!"

"Give us our points, throw up hands on a scoundrel who would make away with his pals, and I promise you, soon as we corner him, you shall go scot free."

"No judge?"

"None."

"Nor jug?"

"Less yet."

"Very well. You will find Souvalief—if you're quick—at a place he's been staying on the quiet to perfect his plans."

"Where is it?"

The man described a house on a residence street about half a mile distant.

"Rest easy," said Clif to the three men. "We will keep our promise. No more ceremony, Vic, with a ruffian on whom we have——"

"The dead cinch! Come on!"

"Say!" called out the man who had been so talkative.

"Well?" queried Clif.

"If your chase leads you to Souvalief's yacht——"

"Yes?"

"Look out for squalls!"

"Ah!"

"And if you find him yet at the house——"

"Yes, again?"

"Don't let him get his paws first on a camera that stands on the library table."

"Why not?"

The man's two companions were growling at him, as if remonstrating against his giving too much away.

Half disregardful, only, he answered Clif, a long, expressive wink accompanying:

"A word to the wise is sufficient."

"What does he mean?" questioned Vic, as they got outside after securing the door safely.

"We will try and find out."

Fifteen minutes later the twain had located the house described by the Russian's talkative accomplice.

Vic had gone to the rear—Clif went up the front steps and tried the door.

It was not locked. He cautiously entered a long hallway.

He heard some one enter a room—from another—caught the gleam of light under a door. Clif turned its knob and stood in sudden view of Souvalief.

"You!—never!" shouted the Russian, recoiling.

"Oh, yes—it is I!" nodded Clif, tranquilly; "myself and my friend!" and he suggestively glinted the pistol he held at his side.

An impressive tableau figure—white, baffled, undecided—the Russian stood rooted, glaring at Clif across a table.

He had been burning papers in a grate, and a hatchet used in cutting kindling lay on its mantel shelf.

Suddenly he grasped this—suddenly he dove back for the table.

"The camera!" breathed Clif—for there upon the table was that object, and Clif remembered what the man back at the stone house had hinted about it.

It must be important, for Souvalief's evident intent was to destroy it.

Up came the hatchet for a stroke that would annihilate, and Clif foresaw he could not deter it.

But as the hatchet fairly met the camera, something unexpected intervened.

Shielded under the table, some one there lurking seized one corner of the spread.

It was Vic, who had got into the house and the room in some mysterious way—hiding in the dark-

ness as Souvalief entered the room and Clif located him.

The hatchet grazed the camera and split into the bare table with a crashing thud, as the spread was jerked violently.

Off on the floor it rolled. Vic crept out, and Clif made a spring for the ruffian they had run to home cover at last.

CHAPTER XI.

DYNAMITE!

Crash!

Of all the rapid adventures Clif had ever shared, that eventful night seemed to hold its double quota.

Two minutes after Vic had rescued the mysterious camera, the scene had again shifted like magic.

Vic had secured the prize, but the Russian had baffled Clif.

He had swung out the hatchet before the naval cadet could reach him, smashed the lamp, and sped away in the darkness.

Clif had pursued. Out through the rear garden, across its wall into an alley, over a fence and up a huge pile of empty barrels and packing cases the Russian scurried.

As he reached the end of the heap he sprang out of sight.

Clif saw him plainly, for a glare he took for a fire silhouetted the fugitive for a flashing second.

As he vanished the force of his leap sent the box pile toppling.

It came rushing down like an avalanche. Clif leaped to evade, was buffeted, banged, and then swallowed up he knew not how.

His stunned senses came back slowly. He felt himself being swayed along, heard cheery shouts—there was a fling, a clatter, and Clif sprang upright

to find himself—the inmate of a great packing case over which the cover had been loosely placed, and which had just been flung into the midst of a great, roaring bonfire!

A yell from a crowd of surrounding men and boys, greeted the marvelous spectacle of a full-rigged naval cadet arising phoenix-like from the flames!

Clif cleared the box, the fire, the scene, like a phantom—asking for no explanation, waiting to give none.

He understood that a crowd celebrating a local election had chanced to select the box he had tumbled into for fuel, had unwittingly carried him to the bonfire.

Clif cared not for what he escaped—all his thoughts were fixed on the man who had escaped him.

“The yacht!”

That suggestive theme was the sole one occupying his mind, as he rushed back for the house, found no Vic, dashed for the prison place of the Russian's three accomplices.

A brief parley, large promises, severe threats, and Clif sped for the bay front.

The clocks were tolling three as the gritty naval cadet stepped aboard a large-sized craft with one light showing in its forward cabin.

He counted all his recent arduous exertions as nothing as he made out a familiar figure through the window.

Souvalief seemed to have at that moment arrived—without a moment's hesitation Clif was in his company.

He shut the door after him, he braced his back against it, he confronted the astounded Russian, grim as Nemesis.

“Again!” shouted Souvalief, unbelievably.

“Again, and always!” answered Clif. “I have you covered, and I will not spare the powder this time, if you attempt any tricks!”

Souvalief backed to the wall, white, but wicked looking as ever.

"I reckon you can't be downed!" he laughed, huskily. "See here, you have me, and you can show me up hard!"

"You may well admit that!"

"A royal berth in the royal Russian navy wouldn't tempt you to let up on me?"

"You talk pretty modern English for a foreigner, but—no! I prefer the American eagle to the Russian bear, every time!"

"Bah! And a sure, spot cash ten thousand or so?"

"Couldn't think of it—you see, force of habit makes me too true to my colors to palter with a——"

"Dynamiter!" so suddenly, so fiendishly hissed Souvalief that Clif was fairly startled. "Cadet!" he continued, with blazing eyes of desperation, "if one thing comes out about me, all follow. I will not face it. My liberty—take the rest. I demand it, or this! that! Be warned!"

The fellow had placed his hands behind him—Clif saw that they covered two buttons sunk in the woodwork.

"Listen!" pursued the monster, "I intended blowing to nothingness the millionaire, to get his millions after I had wedded his daughter. They are now aboard in the next cabin. I swear to add you, the girl, all hands, to the list if you do not allow me to escape!"

Clif felt his hair rise on end—the man was in earnest.

"Do you understand me?" hissed the horrible wretch. "I press these knobs—the hold is stored with dynamite."

"Press them!"

Clif thrilled.

A door had swung open—the speaker had appeared in full view. "I have disconnected the wires," he announced.

"Adrian Grenoble!" gasped the baffled Russian.

"Miss Morton is safe."

She appeared at the threshold.

"Her father knows you as a mercenary, heartless murderer!"

The gray-haired old millionaire stood trembling by the side of his devoted daughter.

"And—no! Now then, Faraday! bravest of the brave! to whom we owe everything; help me get this man his just deserts!"

Souvalief had sprang at Grenoble to throttle him—a blow had sent him stunned, bleeding, to the floor.

They secured him, hand and foot, for they knew him to be a slippery, dangerous foe.

Only one person seemed grieved at his final discomfiture—the millionaire.

"He saved my life!" he murmured, feelingly.

"He is a villain, but I cannot forget gratitude!"

There was a quick step, a new arrival—Vic.

Like Clif, he had got track of the yacht from the three captives.

"Those fellows have told me a lot more," he said to Clif. "Is this Mr. Grenoble? They confess the whole scheme that placed you in the position of a forger."

"Do you hear, father?" fluttered Miss Morton—"Adrian is innocent!"

"Yes, but General Souvalief?"

"Ah!" said Vic, "let me remark—he isn't General Souvalief."

"What's that!" cried Clif, struck by a thought that somehow had not struck him before.

"No. He has simply been trifling with the grateful instincts of this kind-hearted old man."

"Not Souvalief!" murmured the millionaire incredulously.

"This camera proves it—or, rather, will," affirmed Vic.

"How is that?" propounded Clif.

"One of those three fellows ran across a Russian sailor who had a book containing portraits of many notable Russians."

"I see," nodded Clif.

"He couldn't buy or borrow it, for the sailor was leaving the city. An idea struck him. He took a photograph of the photograph, to blackmail Souvalief, who gave him a big sum for it. Developed, that will be the start in proving Souvalief to be just what his accomplices declare——"

"And what is that?" inquired Grenoble.

"A professional dynamiter, from Russia, who became aware of Mr. Morton's rescue by Souvalief, and has been playing the general for a bride—a fortune."

"What a merciful release from a villain!" murmured the millionaire, fervently.

"What can I say to you?" spoke Adrian Grenoble as he extended a hand to Clif—"see what you have restored to me!"

The blushing, happy girl upon his arm looked her loveliest at Clif.

"Yes, indeed! What shall we say?" she murmured, gratefully.

"Say what all the fellows at the Annapolis Naval Academy say of their friend, chum, and hero!" suggested Vic, enthusiastically.

"And what is that?" asked the millionaire's beautiful daughter.

"Faraday forever!"

[THE END.]

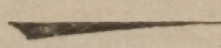
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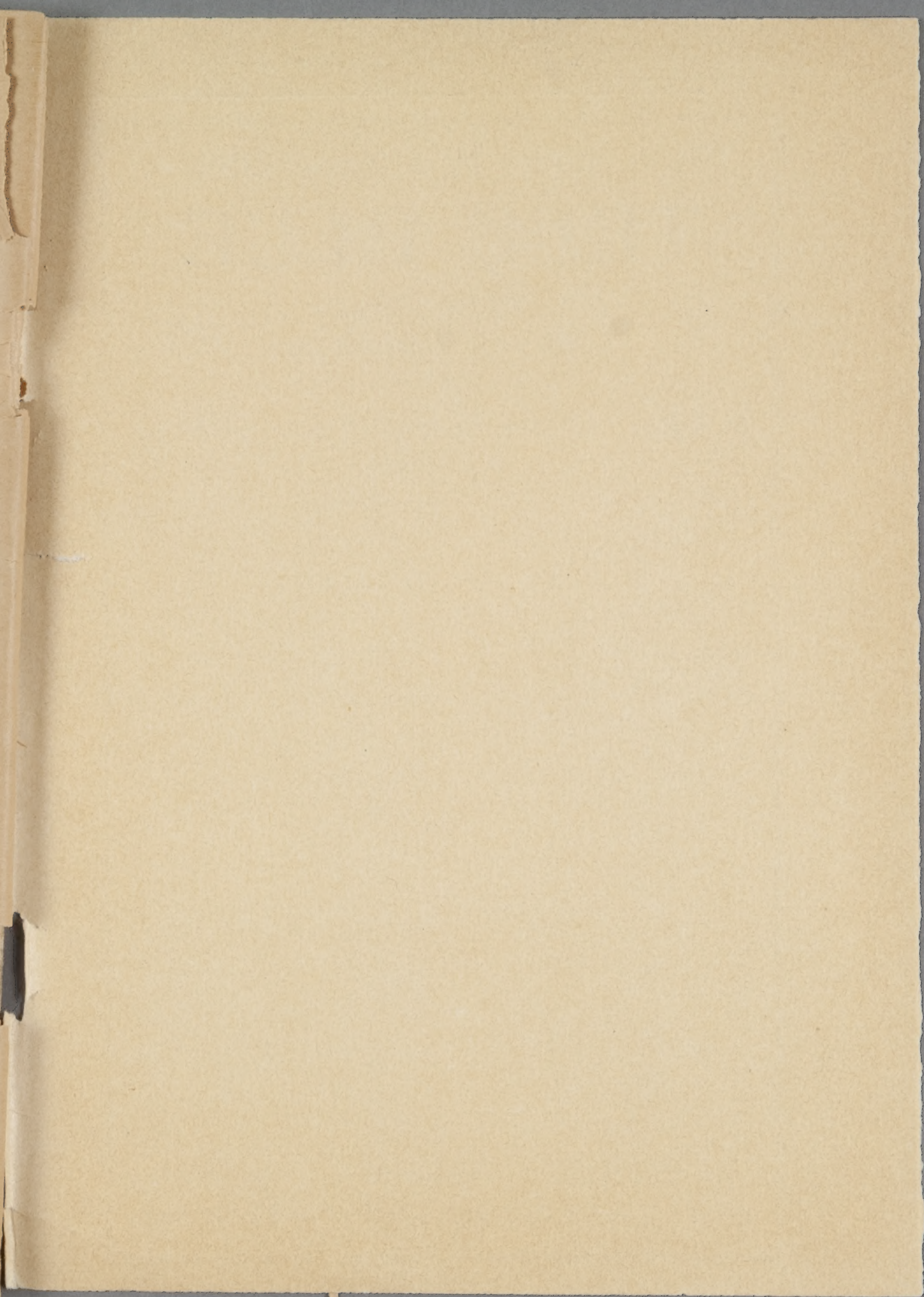
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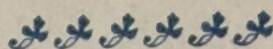


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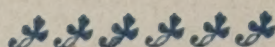
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